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# What is the Nature of Prejudice Between Religious 'Left', 'Right'?

*Part Two of Two-Part Series*

*(The following article is Part Two in the current two-part series based on a survey conducted for The Robert H. Schuller Ministries,* How Can Christian Liberals and Conservatives Be Brought Together? *The article was written by Dr. Robert Wuthnow, Professor of Sociology at Princeton University.)*

This article examines the relations among the various questions in the survey in further detail. Its purpose is to explore the nature of prejudice between religious liberals and religious conservatives. The extent of this prejudice, its sources, and some possible ways of drawing liberals and conservatives together are the focus of this article.

### Construction of Scales

In order to have a convenient summary measure of prejudice against religious conservatives and of prejudice against religious liberals two scales were constructed. The 'Anti-Conservative' scale was based on six items, all of which reflected negative stereotypes of religious conservatives: that people with conservative religious views are (1) intolerant of other religious views, (2) overly strict on moral issues, (3) fanatical about their beliefs, (4) not very thoughtful or sophisticated, (5) closeminded, and (6) too rigid and simplistic. Persons received one point on the scale for each of these stereotypes that they said applied to religious conservatives.

The 'Anti-Liberal' scale was also based on six negative stereotype items: that people with liberal views (1) are morally loose, (2) substitute social concerns for the true gospel, (3) do not truly know Christ, (4) have a superficial knowledge of the Bible, (5) are influenced too much by secular humanism, and (6) are too compromising with the world.

For both scales, persons who received a score of zero on the scale were classified as "low," persons who received a score of 1, 2, or 3 were classified as "medium," and persons who received a score of 4, 5, or 6 were classified as "high." Since much of the following discussion focuses on persons who scored higher on either Anti-Conservatism or Anti-Liberalism, it is important to emphasize that these were persons who accepted at least four of the negative stereotypes about religious conservatives or about religious liberals.

### High Levels of Negative Views

The high levels of negative sentiment that currently exist in American religion are vividly shown by the scores on the two scales (see Table 1). Nineteen percent of the total sample scored high on Anti-Conservatism and another 41 percent scored medium, leaving only 40 percent who scored low. On the Anti-Liberal scale, 12 percent scored high and another 48 percent scored medium, again leaving only 40 percent who scored low.

When liberals' views of conservatives and conservatives' views of liberals are examined, the results are even more striking. Among those who classified themselves as religious liberals, 41 percent scored high on the Anti-Conservative scale. And among those who classified themselves as religious conservatives, 31 percent scored high on the Anti-Liberal scale.

In other words, about four of every 10 liberals harbor negative views of their conservative brethren, and about a third of all conservatives harbors negative views of the liberal counterparts.

Needless to say, except that it further dramatizes the gap separating religious groups, conservatives and liberals do not share these negative views about themselves. Only 7 percent of the conservatives scored high on Anti-Conservatism, and only 3 percent of the liberals scored

*(continued on p. 2)*

high on Anti-Liberalism, as seen on the following table:

**TABLE 1. RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE SCALES**

| | |
|---|---|
| *Anti-Conservative Scale* | |
| Low | 40% |
| Medium | 41% |
| High | 19% |
| *Anti-Liberalism Scale* | |
| Low | 40% |
| Medium | 48% |
| High | 12% |
| *Percent Scoring "High" on Anti-Conservatism Among:* | |
| Conservatives | 7% |
| Moderates | 18% |
| Liberals | 41% |
| *Percent Scoring "High" on Anti-Liberalism Among:* | |
| Conservatives | 31% |
| Moderates | 11% |
| Liberals | 3% |

Studies of other kinds of prejudice – anti-Semitism, racial hostility – show that negative stereotypes are typically associated with negative feelings. The same is true here (see Table 2). Those who scored high on the Anti-Conservatism scale were more likely to have negative feelings about conservatives than were those who scored low on the scale. For example, 29 percent of those who scored high said they disliked fundamentalists, compared to only 14 percent of those who scored low. In the former category, 28 percent said they disliked "evangelicals," compared to only 9 percent of the latter. The two groups also differed in their opinions of the *power* of religious conservatives. More than half of those who scored high on the scale thought conservatives have too much power "among the religious leaders on television," compared to only one-sixth of those who scored low on the scale. In the former category, about a third thought conservatives had too much power in the government, in their community, in the schools, and in national religious agencies; fewer than one-tenth of those who scored low on Anti-Conservatism felt this way.

Anti-liberal stereotypes, similarly, were associated with holding other kinds of negative feelings about liberals. For example, denominations that are sometimes identified as liberal or mainstream, such as Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Methodists, were about twice as likely to be the object of negative feelings among persons who scored high on the Anti-Liberal scale as among persons scoring low on the scale. Again, those scoring high were far more likely to feel that liberals have too much power in the government, schools, media, etc., than were those scoring low.

**TABLE 2**
**MEASURES OF PREJUDICE BY SCALES**

| | Anti-Conservatism Scale | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Low | Medium | High |
| *Percent who dislike:* | % | % | % |
| Fundamentalists | 14 | 26 | 29 |
| Evangelicals | 9 | 19 | 28 |
| Charismatics | 15 | 21 | 27 |
| Baptists | 5 | 7 | 12 |
| *Percent who feel conservatives have too much power among:* | | | |
| Religious TV leaders | 15 | 37 | 54 |
| In government | 11 | 19 | 31 |
| In schools | 11 | 19 | 29 |
| In community | 10 | 19 | 29 |
| National religious agencies | 9 | 23 | 33 |
| Mass media | 9 | 23 | 29 |
| Denomination | 7 | 14 | 16 |
| Local church | 13 | 21 | 23 |

| | Anti-Liberalism Scale | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Low | Medium | High |
| *Percent who dislike:* | % | % | % |
| Episcopalians | 6 | 9 | 15 |
| Presbyterians | 5 | 7 | 12 |
| Lutherans | 5 | 7 | 14 |
| Catholics | 6 | 7 | 15 |

| | Anti-Liberalism Scale | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Low | Medium | High |
| *Percent who feel liberals have too much power among:* | % | % | % |
| Religious TV leaders | 11 | 21 | 31 |
| In government | 8 | 24 | 46 |
| In schools | 10 | 23 | 46 |
| In community | 9 | 17 | 35 |
| National religious agencies | 9 | 19 | 41 |
| Mass media | 15 | 31 | 50 |
| Denomination | 5 | 11 | 17 |
| Local church | 8 | 10 | 18 |

*(continued on p. 3)*

By all indications, then, the two scales do in fact appear to be valid indicators of religious prejudice. They consist of items which clearly have negative connotations and which have been applied stereotypically to an entire religious group, they are stereotypes which are *not* shared by that group itself, and they tend to be associated with dislike and other negative attitudes toward the group at issue. To be sure, not everyone who holds these stereotypes is guilty of prejudice or religious hostility; but the odds of being so are certainly much higher among this group than among those who reject these stereotypes.

### The Role of Contact

One of the most disturbing features of prejudice between religious liberals and conservatives, judging from these data, is the fact that greater contact between the two groups does not seem to reduce levels of prejudice. Studies of racial and ethnic prejudice have shown consistently that contact between groups tends to mitigate stereotypes and hostility. Here, in contrast, prejudice actually seems to be worse among those with greater degrees of contact.

Among liberals who said they had had a great deal of contact with conservatives, 50 percent scored high on the Anti-Conservative scale. In contrast, only 35 percent of the liberals who had had no contact or almost none with conservatives scored high. The relation between conduct and prejudice was even more pronounced among conservatives. More than half of the conservatives who had had a great deal of contact with liberals scored high on the Anti-Liberal scale, compared with only one-sixth of the conservatives who had had no contact or almost none with liberals (see Table 3).

**TABLE 3. RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE BY LEVELS OF CONTACT**

| | Anti-Conservatism (% high) |
|---|---|
| *Among liberals who had had each amount of contact with conservatives:* | |
| A great deal | 50 |
| A fair amount | 43 |
| Only a little | 38 |
| None/almost none | 35 |
| | **Anti-Liberalism (% high)** |
| *Among conservatives who had had each amount of contact with liberals:* | |
| A great deal | 59 |
| A fair amount | 38 |
| Only a little | 19 |
| None/almost none | 13 |

To gain a better understanding of these relationships, prejudice levels were compared among those who had had contact with liberals or conservatives in different settings (see Table 4). Among liberals, having contact with conservatives in one's local church, in a Bible study group, or in a prayer fellowship was the most benign: this type of contact didn't reduce prejudice, as one would hope, but at least it didn't make it worse. In contrast, contact with conservatives in a former church was associated with one of the highest levels of prejudice. The data are limited in what they allow us to infer here, but these may well be people who switched churches because of conflict with other parishoners who held different views. The data also suggest that the media – television, newspapers, magazines – may be responsible for some of the hostility that currently exists between liberals and conservatives. Liberals who had had contact with conservatives by reading about them or by hearing something about them on television were the most likely of all to score high on the Anti-Conservative scale.

### Patterns Also Seen Among Conservatives

These patterns were largely evident among conservatives as well. Those who had had contact with liberals in their own church were the least likely to harbor negative views of liberals. Contact through prayer fellowships was also relatively benign: again, it didn't actually reduce prejudice, but only caused it to be a little higher than average. Contact through a former church was associated with much higher levels of prejudice, as was contact through other churches. And contact through reading and the media was associated with some of the highest levels of anti-liberalism.

### Popular View Belied By Results

The popular view – shared by many of the people surveyed – that all one has to do in order to reduce tension is to ensure greater contact, therefore, is belied by these results. More intimate contact, such as that which presumably takes place in churches, Bible studies, and prayer groups, is certainly better than long-distance contact through the media or other churches. But according to these data, prejudice is still as likely to be present among people who share these intimate contacts as it is among people who have no contact at all – if not more so. Seemingly, something more than contact alone must be tried.

*(continued on p. 4)*

**TABLE 4. RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE BY TYPE OF CONTACT**

| | % High on Anti-Conservatism among Liberals | % High on Anti-Liberalism among Conservatives |
|---|---|---|
| *Who had contact with the other group in:* | | |
| Current church | 42 | 33 |
| Former church | 54 | 49 |
| Other churches | 48 | 55 |
| Bible studies | 44 | 44 |
| Prayer fellowships | 42 | 38 |
| Committees | 51 | 52 |
| Family/relatives | 47 | 54 |
| Friends/neighbors | 48 | 41 |
| At work | 51 | 45 |
| Read about them | 59 | 54 |
| Mass media | 56 | 51 |

### The Role of Education and Understanding

Studies of racial and ethnic prejudice have emphasized the importance of education as a means of reducing prejudice. Education in general appears to reduce the likelihood of believing in simplistic stereotypes. And specific kinds of education can be directed toward achieving greater understanding between groups. But again, the present problem seems to be an exception. If education has positive effects, they are more subtle than these kinds of data can elicit.

Looking first at education in general, those with college educations are actually more likely to hold anti-conservative views than are those with grade school or high school educations (see Table 5). And there are virtually no differences among the different educational categories in the percentages who scored high on Anti-Liberalism. These findings are in stark contrast with those of nearly all studies of racial and ethnic prejudice, which show that education is almost always associated with lower levels of prejudice. It is, of course, difficult for a variety of reasons—including the fact that better-educated persons are more likely to be liberals themselves—to rule out education on these grounds alone.

A clearer conclusion can be drawn from the question which asked persons how much time they had ever spent "trying to understand the teachings and traditions of other denominations than your own." If making the effort to gain understanding actually resulted in greater understanding, then those who had spent a lot of time should have been the least prejudiced. Instead, they were—with one exception—the most prejudiced. Among liberals who had spent a great deal of time trying to understand other denominations, 50 percent scored high on Anti-Conservatism, compared to only 36 percent of the liberals who had spent none. Those who had spent some time were also more likely to score high than those who had spent hardly any time. Among conservatives, Anti-Liberalism also tended to be more likely among those who had spent the greatest amount of time. The exception was that those who had spent a great deal of time had a somewhat smaller percentage who scored high than did those who had spent only some time.

**TABLE 5. THE ROLE OF EDUCATION AND UNDERSTANDING**

| | Level of Education | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Grade School | High School | Some College | Col. Grad. |
| Anti-Conservative (% High) | 10 | 13 | 26 | 34 |
| Anti-Liberal (% High) | 12 | 11 | 14 | 11 |

| | Time Trying to Understand Other Denominations | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Great Deal | Some | Hardly Any | None |
| Anti-Conservative (% High) —Liberals Only | 50 | 44 | 34 | 36 |
| Anti-Liberal (% High) —Conservatives Only | 28 | 44 | 23 | 16 |

The other findings that cast doubts on the general effectiveness of education in reducing religious prejudice come from the questions which asked respondents to consider various *explanations* for the differences between religious groups. Drawing again from studies of racial and ethnic prejudice, it has been demonstrated that persons with more sensitive understandings of group differences are less likely to let these differences result in ill-will. For example, persons who attribute the differences between blacks and whites to historic and cultural factors tend to be more tolerant than are persons who attribute these differences to innate racial qualities. We explored a variety of such explanations for religious differences in the present study, but found them to be generally unrelated to levels of religious prejudice. For example, anti-conservatism among liberals was just as high among those who attributed religious differences to historical differences, choice of words to express beliefs, or cultural tastes as it was among those who thought these differences reflected basic religious beliefs or personality differences. Much the same was true among conservatives as far as anti-liberalism was concerned.

*(continued on p. 5)*

| *Who said each of the following was a major reason for differences:* | Percent High on Anti-Conservatism Among Liberals | Percent High on Anti-Liberalism Among Conservatives |
|---|---|---|
| Styles of worship | 42 | 32 |
| Levels of education | 43 | 35 |
| Choice of words | 50 | 38 |
| Historical differences | 54 | 29 |
| Basic beliefs | 47 | 37 |
| Way raised | 47 | 35 |
| Self images | 50 | 37 |
| Social issues | 49 | 39 |
| Speech/dress | 37 | 41 |
| Cultural tastes | 46 | 35 |
| Personalities | 38 | 27 |

### The Role of Religious Values

Having explored several dead-ends in attempting to find factors associated with reductions in prejudice, then, we come to the role of religious differences themselves. There is, after all, a grain of truth in the stereotypes that liberals hold of conservatives and in the stereotypes that conservatives hold of liberals – just as there is a grain of truth in all stereotypes. Persons in the survey who identified themselves as religious conservatives were, in fact, more likely to hold views of the Bible, for example, which liberals might regard as rigid, simplistic, or closed minded. And self-identified liberals were more likely to express views about the Bible or about the importance of their religious commitments which might lead conservatives to regard them as shallow in their beliefs or too compromising with the secular culture.

The survey, however, also documents the fact that conservatives and liberals agree on many basic religious issues. One of the problems that may obscure the extent of this agreement in the present data is that most of those who did not identify themselves as Christians did identify themselves as religious liberals – thus about a quarter of the liberals consider themselves non-Christians. If this group is removed from the data, it then becomes much more evident that Christians tend to agree on many beliefs, regardless of whether they are conservatives or liberals. Usually the percentages are somewhat higher among conservatives than among liberals, but it is by no means difficult to point out beliefs on which the vast majority of liberals and conservatives agree. For example, among liberal Christians almost three-quarters say they have no doubts that Jesus was fully God and fully human, and better than eight in 10 say this belief is very or fairly important to them (see Table 6). Similarly, 98 percent of the liberal Christians feel that God loves them, 5 out of 6 say that growing into a deeper relationship with God is very or fairly important to them, and equally high proportions say this about the importance of prayer and having eternal salvation. Where liberals differ most from conservatives is on specific interpretations of the Bible, on the value of proselytizing, and on so-called "born again" experiences. But even here the differences are by no means absolute. For example, better than five-sixths of the liberals said they believed in the inspiration of scripture, almost four in 10 claimed to be "born again," and two-thirds thought it very or fairly important to share the love of Christ. There are, then, significant areas of agreement that could become the basis of ministries aimed at achieving greater unity between liberals and conservatives.

**TABLE 6. RELIGIOUS VALUES (SELF-IDENTIFIED CHRISTIANS ONLY)**

| | Conservatives % | Moderates % | Liberals % |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Christ fully God/fully man* | | | |
| —No doubts | 89 | 79 | 71 |
| —Some doubts | 8 | 18 | 21 |
| —Serious doubts | 2 | 3 | 8 |
| *How important to you* | | | |
| —Very | 85 | 65 | 53 |
| —Fairly | 12 | 26 | 30 |
| —Not very | 2 | 6 | 10 |
| *Feel that God loves you* | | | |
| —Yes | 100 | 99 | 98 |
| *View of Bible* | | | |
| —Literal | 63 | 36 | 27 |
| —Inspired | 32 | 55 | 58 |
| —Fables | 3 | 8 | 11 |
| *Born Again experience* | | | |
| —Yes | 68 | 40 | 38 |
| *Encourage others to believe* | | | |
| —Yes | 75 | 48 | 40 |
| *Say each of the following is very or fairly important* | | | |
| *Deeper relationship with God* | 94 | 92 | 82 |
| *Sharing the love of Christ* | 90 | 80 | 67 |
| *Reading the Bible* | 89 | 78 | 66 |
| *Prayer* | 94 | 93 | 86 |
| *Eternal salvation* | 92 | 89 | 82 |
| *Close fellowship* | 79 | 63 | 50 |
| *Religious services* | 89 | 79 | 60 |
| *Bringing Christians together* | 85 | 77 | 67 |

*(continued on p. 6)*

### The Potential for Reconciliation

Finally, the data offered some clues as to the kinds of beliefs that might be conducive to greater understanding between liberals and conservatives. These clues were derived by examining the extent of anti-liberalism among conservative Christians who held different kinds of views and, conversely, the extent of anti-conservatism among liberal Christians who held various views. On the negative side, the data suggest clearly that attitudes toward the Moral Majority are currently one of the most divisive issues among both liberal and conservative Christians. For example, among conservatives who strongly favored the activities of the Moral Majority, 58 percent scored high on Anti-Liberalism. And among liberals who strongly opposed the activities of the Moral Majority, 60 percent scored high on Anti-Conservatism. Thus, as with the earlier results on the role of the media, it appears that national issues – particularly those involving religion and politics – are a significant factor in the divisions between liberals and conservatives.

On the positive side, anti-liberalism seems to be lowest among conservative Christians who have taken a somewhat more modified stance toward traditional fundamentalist doctrines. The data do not allow a very thorough exploration of these effects, but two comparisons point clearly to their importance. First, those who say the Bible is divinely inspired but not to be taken literally in every respect are significantly less likely to hold anti-liberal prejudices than those who say the Bible should always be interpreted literally. And second, anti-liberalism is much less pronounced among conservative Christians who feel that Christians' top priority should be spiritual growth than it is among those who prefer to emphasize winning the world for Christ.

For liberals, the views that seem most clearly associated with low levels of anti-conservatism are ones which reflect greater commitment to their faith. For example, liberal Christians who say growing into a deeper relationship with God is very important to them are much less likely to hold anti-conservative prejudices than are liberal Christians who say this growth is unimportant. Those who say prayer is very important are also less likely to exhibit these prejudices than are those who say prayer is unimportant. One other value which seems to be associated with reduced prejudice among liberals – although the same is not true among conservatives – is an emphasis on the importance of bringing Christians together. Liberals who stressed this value were significantly less likely to score high on anti-conservatism than were liberals who did not.

In the end, most of these relationships are not particularly surprising. What they document, however, is that room exists – much room – for conservative Christians to become less doctrinnaire without abandoning the essentials of their faith, and that much room also exists for liberal Christians to hold their faith more deeply without losing their liberal identity. Both groups, it appears, could in the process become instruments of reconciliation.

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